

## Fostering Disability Studies in the Academy

*David Mitchell*

Coming to disability studies and SDS from the humanities has allowed me to witness the influence of a predominantly social science methodology upon other disciplines. While some of our members have bemoaned the "falling numbers" at SDS and its general lack of the organization's professional prestige or respect, I must disagree with both perceptions. Although it may be true that the organization has suffered a drop in interest by researchers in the hard sciences (particularly medicine) and by non-disabled people, the continued growth and influence of the Society has proven substantial.

The call for papers at this year's conference brought in proposals from more than 230 researchers, activists, and artists. Within a week of our registration deadline the home office reported nearly 200 paid registrations. This year's presentations address disability issues across an enormously varied range of social and political contexts. These presenters hail from an impressive array of international countries including Oman, Jordan, Israel, Great Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Mexico, France, Finland, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Japan, Spain, Columbia, El Salvador, Norway, and the United States. Rather than trying to resuscitate a dying institutional entity, I believe we need to be preparing to make a shift toward imagining ourselves as participants in a disciplinary renaissance.

This expansion in the size of the annual conference can be accounted for in numerous ways, but I'd like to point to three important areas that led directly to the increase: 1) the effort by the Board to forward an international theme that would draw in presenters from outside the U.S. and Canadian borders; 2) the development of an Internet presence that helped to circulate knowledge of the Society and the annual conference in sweeping fashion; and 3) the increasing presence of humanities scholars in the organization. I will leave the second area for others more knowledgeable than myself to comment upon, but I'd like to address points one and three at some length. Each of these tactics will need to be fostered in the years to come if we are to move our organization from a relatively small and informal group of interested parties to a more influential and large-scale professional society.

The first strategy of tapping into an international disability studies community of scholars is one that could continue to yield the society new members in the years to come. It seems to me that the increasing interdisciplinary and international flavor of disability studies is one of its strengths - many disciplinary approaches boast an international/interdisciplinary component but few can match the diversity already achieved by scholars in disability studies. While some may feel that this multi-disciplinary characteristic of disability studies waters down the field, the universal presence of disabled people in all cultures and historical epochs will ultimately prove the real wealth of this field. Not only will it allow us to optimize the increasingly global nature of academic scholarship, disability must be addressed as a fact of human existence that cannot be wished away, resolved, or obliterated once and for all. We must base our politics and studies upon a founding idea that while disabilities change from decade to decade and epoch to epoch, disability is a defining aspect of the human condition. Our movement must insist upon the idea that disability is the rule of human experience, not the exception. Indeed one cannot understand the human condition without comprehending the experiences of disabled people.

This last point is key if we are to forward the work and influence of disability studies because unlike other minority identities such as race/gender/sexuality, disability will struggle to base its politics upon a model of "embrace." Disabled people often find it difficult to identify as "disabled", and our constituency is filled with stories of those who came to their "disabled identity" either late-in-the-day or with a great deal of trepidation.

While we can argue (and I think we should) that this grudging recognition is the result of social stigma and widespread discrimination, the awkwardness of claiming our disabilities as a source of empowerment also results from the fact that impairment is an actual experience that limits our bodies and our various capacities. Though African Americans or women can now imagine their blackness or femininity as a cultural asset, we need to discuss why disability is difficult to cast in a parallel light. Yet like race and gender, disability impacts upon the experience of an embodied life by demonstrating just how integral a role our biologies play in the negotiation of our lives and environments. Thus, disability

becomes an axis of study that takes into account both the social construction of bodies and the "real" impact of bodies upon our social lives.

The growing presence of disability scholarship in the humanities is, from my own point of view, an important development in the future of the organization. Besides the personal benefit of this growing presence to the acceptability and support of my own work, the humanities study of disability serves as an important crossroads for SDS and its influence in other academic spheres. As one of the founding members of the first permanent committee on disability issues in the Modern Languages Association (MLA), I witnessed a sea change in the largest organization of humanities scholars in the world (30,000+ members). Not only did the establishment of the disability committee signal a boon to the increasing legitimacy of disability studies in the academy, but SDS served as a fulcrum for improving the MLA's awareness of its shortcomings, omissions, and insensitivities with regard to researchers and students with disabilities. Those of us who directly participated in the revision of this influential organization used SDS as a model which the MLA should attempt to emulate.

The many changes that the disability committee has implemented since its formation include: the recategorization of sign language from an artificial to a natural language, the reintroduction of excised vocabulary necessary to researching disability in the MLA Bibliographical archive, an expansive rewriting of the policies and language concerning people with disabilities in all of the organization's conference and promotional materials, the promotion of a pro-active approach to the MLA's disabled constituency, the inclusion of disability in the Association's affirmative action policies regarding its own hiring practices and those of the academy at large, and the promotion of disability studies as a neglected area of scholarly investigation in the humanities.

The establishment of this permanent committee has also resulted in the exponential increase in disability issues within the study of literature and languages. Since our first series of panels on disability in 1995, we have consistently received more than 100 paper proposals each year from MLA members. Our committee has compiled a list of more than 300 interested scholars and we regularly sponsor four to five panels a year on aspects of disability studies in the humanities at the annual convention. Since the inception of the MLA disability committee, a discussion group on disability studies has also been established and the University of Michigan Press has begun to publish an academic series in disability studies with a humanities base. These successes help to evidence the influence that disability studies in general and SDS in particular have had upon the analysis of disability issues in other disciplines. Ironically, such influence often goes unheard of within the field and organization itself. We need to measure the organization's clout in ways that move far beyond the literal size of its constituency or the visible influence of its scholarship.

This issue also helps to address the concern of "returning" participants. I don't believe that SDS can be made to serve as the primary conference for most academics. To make this a marker of our success will prove frustrating because no organization that addresses a specific subject will be viewed as "expansive" enough by departments, administrators, peer reviewers, etc. We could feel defeated by this point and long for it to be different, but I think we should recognize it as a reality.

In recognizing this fact we prepare ourselves to understand the organization's function better. The marvel is that the Society continues to draw interested parties despite the fact that most are employed only in a tangential relation with respect to disability studies (and one's participation doesn't generally help with making a case for professional development on the home front). I think SDS serves best as a way station for scholars who share an expertise and an interest in an area of study and then go off to report upon that expertise in their home fields. In this way SDS acts as a locus of information exchange and endorsement for disability scholars to then present their findings to a wider audience (this is the academic and intellectual equivalent to Corinne's call for an official seal of approval).

I also want to address the continually plaguing issue of disability studies' relationship to scientific method. There are two possibilities that we may take up with respect to this issue: 1) either we seek to expose a bias in the science of disability in order to improve its methods through critique, or 2) we expose the bias in order to argue that scientific method cannot achieve the objectivity to which it aspires. A third possibility is that we operate between these two positions because the second stance often winds

up accomplishing the first objective.

By arguing against the possibility of an unbiased science we push scientists to commit themselves to demonstrating their awareness of the bias that underlies their methods. My own feeling is that medical people have left SDS because they don't want to negotiate the input of those they are supposed to correct or manage. SDS is a tool of critique that medicine would rather ignore. Yet, feminism eventually influenced medicine from the outside by changing social attitudes and encouraging women to take control of the discourse produced about them and in their name. This will inevitably take time and the eventual infiltration of people with disabilities into the medical field itself.

This last issue places us at the heart of the objective for SDS and disability studies in the years to come. We must work to train graduate students with disabilities as well as students with a disability perspective. The widespread proliferation of disability studies in the academy will ultimately lead to the hiring of people with disabilities in the very fields that have traditionally "managed" them. A recent study I read placed the number of disabled students in the academy at no less than one million. SDS could foster the development of survey tools to understand what professions those students pursue and what percentage of them ultimately find employment. In addition, we could survey academic departments in order to find out whether they hire teachers with disabilities and in doing so place pressure upon them to change their hiring practices.

Increasing the visibility of people with disabilities in positions of authority is the cornerstone of our political agenda. I remember going with my daughter to the University of Michigan hospital and being struck by the presence of one nurse with a visible disability. Her singular appearance caused a revolution in my mind about how different the medical establishment would be if those who were served by it were also in charge of manipulating its instruments and ideas. There is a parallel for the academy in this model for it is crucial for students to see disabled people in front of the classroom wielding the authority of knowledge - no matter what the subject. One changes a society ultimately by placing its more marginal members in positions of authority: a visual revolution that the academy will be central in accomplishing.

To end here are some specific suggestions for the organization as a whole:

1. We need a publicity person or committee who can offer the Society a more visible public role in the media. The annual conference needs to issue press releases about its activities and provide press kits and a press room to encourage more coverage from local and national media.
2. We might consider forwarding panels at each conference that discuss the nature and influence of disability studies in various disciplines to date.
3. The Society should apply for a grant to develop a model or pilot program that could then be utilized by individual universities to implement their own disability studies programs and courses. We might go to organizations such as the NEH for this purpose.
4. We need to press national funding organizations such as NIDRR to evolve a more expansive notion of what disability studies entails and to offer grants to disciplines outside of the sciences.
5. With the growth of the Society we need to begin discussing funding for the management of the home office and the sponsorship of DSQ as an instrument of the organization's research findings.
6. DSQ needs to be transformed out of the newsletter mode and into a legitimate refereed journal for the publication and promotion of disability studies in the U.S. We also need to get the contents of DSQ online and to have DSQ included in academic search engines such as UnCover.
7. We might consider developing a separate newsletter based upon the model of the Women's Review of Books. Here we could publish substantive reviews of new work in disability studies and develop a more critical and discerning evaluation of work in the field.
8. Finally, the Society could look to middle organizations that help to link foundations with donors. There is one of these in Los Angeles that devotes itself to finding individuals and organizations who will bankroll the promotion of a society's agenda.

David Mitchell, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of English at Northern Michigan University.